

Town of



AMHERST *Massachusetts*

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SELECT BOARD MEETING

April 21, 2010

New Business

To: Stephanie O'Keeffe, Chair, Amherst Select Board
Members of the Amherst Select Board

From: Laurence Shaffer, Town Manager

Re: Save Our Stop Rail Task Force Term Extension

Date: April 16, 2010

According to its charge, the term of the Save Our Stop Task Force ends on May 30, 2010, by which time the Task Force is to have rendered a report to the Select Board on its findings. That report is currently in development. Note that the Task Force has achieved one of its goals to draw attention and to study various issues for maintaining passenger rail service in Amherst.

Amherst continues to face challenges relative to maintaining and enhancing passenger rail service at the Amherst Depot. Consequently, it is my belief that without a continued focus on this issue, the town will lose its Amtrak stop. One of the most important tools for carrying that work forward is the Save Our Stop Task Force.

It would therefore be my recommendation that the charge for this task force be extended from its originally defined date of closure of May 30, 2010 to June 30, 2011, and that the following additional elements be added to its original charge:

- 3) To work with Northampton, UMass Transit/PVTA, and others to plan for dedicated express bus service to the future Northampton Amtrak stop, and to jointly plan for improved future bus access to the Northampton Amtrak stop site.
- 4) To work with area legislators and MassDOT to assure significant involvement by Amherst and other affected communities in the feasibility study and planning for "Inland Route" improvements between Worcester and Springfield, which could provide future passenger rail access between Amherst and Boston via Palmer.

- 5) To continue to work with NECR, UMass, UConn, Palmer, and communities and entities in CT and VT to establish passenger rail service over the NECR line between Brattleboro and New London, with appropriate stops in VT (Brattleboro), Massachusetts (Millers Falls, Amherst, Palmer), and Connecticut (Mansfield/Storrs (UConn), Willimantic, Norwich, and other CT communities south to New London).

I would also recommend that all current members of the task force have their membership extended for that same additional year.

Therefore, I would recommend that the Select Board adopt the following suggested motions:

Motion 1 –

VOTED unanimously, OR ____ O’Keeffe, ____ Brewer, ____ Hayden, ____ Stein, ____ Wald to amend the charge for the Save Our Stop Task Force by extending the expiration date from May 30, 2010 to June 30, 2011.

Motion 2 –

VOTED unanimously, OR ____ O’Keeffe, ____ Brewer, ____ Hayden, ____ Stein, ____ Wald to amend the charge for the Save Our Stop Task Force by adding the following:

- 3) To work with Northampton, UMass Transit/PVTA, and others to plan for dedicated express bus service to the future Northampton Amtrak stop, and to jointly plan for improved future bus access to the Northampton Amtrak stop site.
- 4) To work with area legislators and MassDOT to assure significant involvement by Amherst and other affected communities in the feasibility study and planning for “Inland Route” improvements between Worcester and Springfield, which could provide future passenger rail access between Amherst and Boston via Palmer.
- 5) To continue to work with NECR, UMass, UConn, Palmer, and communities and entities in CT and VT to establish passenger rail service over the NECR line between Brattleboro and New London, with appropriate stops in VT (Brattleboro), Massachusetts (Millers Falls, Amherst, Palmer), and Connecticut (Mansfield/Storrs (UConn), Willimantic, Norwich, and other CT communities south to New London).

Motion 3 –

VOTED unanimously, OR ____ O’Keeffe, ____ Brewer, ____ Hayden, ____ Stein, ____ Wald to extend the current membership of the Save Our Stop Task Force appointments to expire June 30, 2011.

SAVE OUR STOP TASK FORCE

REPORT

The SOS Task Force was created by the Amherst Select Board in June 1, 2009, and assigned the following charge:

- 1) To study the effect that the availability of the Amtrak train stop has on the citizens of Amherst and the region.
- 2) To study the impact that the discontinuation of the rail stop would have upon the citizens of Amherst and the region, and
- 3) To recommend to the Select Board actions to enhance passenger rail service in Amherst and protect Amherst from the effect of the discontinuation of the Amtrak stop in Amherst.

The Task Force was required to report back to the Select Board by May 30, 2010. What follows is the report and recommendations of the Task Force.

The Effect on Amherst of the Availability of Rail Service

Summary - Amherst still uses its 1853 Amherst Depot, half of which is still operated as an Amtrak 'shelter'. The current availability of rail service in Amherst consists of two, one-way stops (one northbound, one southbound) per day by the Amtrak Vermonter. Amtrak ridership data indicates that, for a passenger rail stop with two stops/day that does not serve a large urban area, the Amherst Depot generates a lot of demand compared to other stops.

Amherst Ridership Increases Have Lead the State - Since 2006, Amherst's Amtrak (Vermont) ridership has increased from 8,928 to 13,581, an increase of 52%. While Amtrak ridership was down 6.5% statewide between 2008 and 2009 (~183,479 riders), among the handful of six Massachusetts communities whose ridership actually increased, Amherst had the largest numerical increase with +902 additional riders per year (Worcester was second with +518). In western Massachusetts, Amherst's passenger rail ridership contribution was even more evident. The ridership figures for 2007-2009 for the four western Massachusetts communities with Amtrak stops, and their increases or decreases:

| | <u>2007</u> | <u>2008</u> | <u>2009</u> | <u>Δ2007-08</u> | <u>Δ2008-09</u> | <u>Δ2007-09</u> |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Amherst | 11,432 | 12,679 | 13,581 | +1,247 (+10.9%) | + 902 (+7.1%) | +2,149 (+18.8%) |
| Springfield | 112,413 | 113,955 | 111,215 | +1,641 (+1.5%) | - 2,740 (-2.4%) | - 1,198 (-1.1%) |
| Worcester | 5,406 | 6,183 | 6,701 | + 777 (+14.4%) | + 518 (+8.4%) | +1,295 (+24%) |
| Pittsfield | 5,311 | 6,893 | 6,700 | +1,582 (+29.7%) | -193 (-2.8%) | +1,389 (26.2%) |

To provide a better measure of the impact of rail passenger availability (ridership use) on these four communities, we can compare the numerical change (increase or decrease) in ridership over time against the total population of the community. While Amtrak ridership figures do not account for origins or destinations, just numbers of people getting on and getting off, this kind of comparison can provide a gross indicator of what percentage of a community, or the area it represents, is using passenger rail service. Here is a comparison of the 2007-2009 increases or decreases in ridership shown as a percentage of their total population:

| | Population | <u>△2007-09</u> | <u>Ridership △ as a Percentage of Total Population</u> |
|-------------|---------------------|-----------------|--|
| Amherst | 35,892 (2009) | +2,149 (+18.8%) | +5.9% |
| Springfield | 150,640 (2008 est.) | - 1,198 (-1.1%) | - 0.8% |
| Worcester | 175,011 (2008 est.) | +1,295 (+24%) | +0.74% |
| Pittsfield | 42,652 (2008 est.) | +1,389 (26.2%) | +3.3% |

Essentially, between 2006 and 2009, the Amherst Depot Amtrak stop contributed a greater numerical increase in ridership than any other single community in the Commonwealth. Other Amtrak stops carried many more passengers, but the majority of those lost ridership during that period, or made very small gains. Amherst also had greater numerical increases in ridership than the second and third largest urban centers located in central and western Massachusetts. Finally, Amherst's ridership increases as a percentage of Amherst's population showed that Amherst and its surrounding area generate a great deal of passenger rail demand.

Part of this is because of Amherst's demographics, which includes an undergraduate student population of over 29,000 people. Students and academic travelers are among the most consistent users of passenger rail service. Amherst is also a regional employment center for a larger area. Amherst and its immediately abutting communities have a total population of nearly 87,000 people—the Amherst area is the single largest source of passenger rail ridership in the Upper Valley. By comparison, Northampton and its immediately abutting communities have a population of only 57,000.

The Impact of Discontinuation

Summary - The net impact of discontinuation of the Vermonter service through Amherst will be a significant decrease in ridership access for Amherst residents.

Moving Across the River - The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) has received a \$70 million ARRA grant for the portions of the Knowledge Corridor project within the state, to restore and rebuild a rail line on the western side of the Connecticut River as part of a larger project connecting New Haven, CT to St. Albans, VT. The Massachusetts portion of the project will be completed in the next 2-5 years. Once completed, Amtrak will move its Vermonter service off of the NECR line going through Amherst over to the Connecticut River Pan-Am line. The Knowledge Corridor project includes a simple new Amtrak platform and canopy at the Northampton Depot, but no ticket service—all tickets will have to be pre-purchased.

No Improvements in Bus Service – During development of the Knowledge Corridor plan, there was discussion of creating dedicated bus service between Amherst and the proposed Northampton Amtrak stop. The final Knowledge Corridor plan funded through the ARRA includes no such service. It assumes that access to the Northampton stop for rail passengers from the Amherst area will be provided by existing bus services: “existing transit service would continue to provide a connection between Northampton, UMass and Amherst.” MassDOT representatives have directly indicated that any improvements needed in that bus transit service—

dedicated express buses timed to respond to the Vermonter stops, for instance—would have to be generated and paid for locally.

And Then, We Can't Get There From Here – The proposed Northampton Amtrak stop will be a long, rectangular concrete pad with a canopy sited within the railroad right-of-way near the former Northampton Depot. There will be no ticket kiosks or stand—all Amtrak tickets will have to be pre-purchased online or through local travel agents. The former Northampton Depot property is privately owned and operated as two restaurants with associated parking, and will not be involved in providing any waiting area out of the weather nor any direct services to rail passengers.

The Northampton depot parking area **does not currently have a vehicle circulation pattern or parking to accommodate buses, nor are any improvements of that kind included in the rail line improvement plan.** The City of Northampton is considering improvements to the parking lot behind the Registry of Deeds building on King Street, with pedestrian improvements that would allow rail users to get up to the railroad right-of-way, and walk between that lot and the proposed rail stop by passing over the rail bridge (the 'mural' bridge) at Bridge Street (Route 9) and there connecting to the northern terminus of the Nagle Downtown Walkway (a small bike/pedestrian path). This would involve a total walking distance from the bus to the train of about 1,200 feet, or just under a quarter of a mile. It is not clear whether or when these improvements would occur. Another option would be a bus stop on Route 5 immediately south of the station, which would involve a walking distance of approximately 400 feet.

SUMMARY

The proposed "discontinuation" will move the Vermonter line from an existing depot stop in Amherst (whose ridership has previously been described) to a rail stop in Northampton. MassDOT assumes that Amherst area riders will access this stop via existing bus services. No bus accommodation exists at the stop, and no effective improvements to accommodate buses are planned as part of the Knowledge Corridor improvement project.

Without extraordinary and costly effort by Amherst and Northampton, even nominal access by Amherst riders to the Northampton rail stop will become significantly more difficult and inconvenient. This will likely increase automobile traffic to and from the Northampton station and the Springfield station and reduce passenger rail ridership overall.

Recommendations

The Save Our Stop task Force offers the following recommendations for action by the Select Board and others:

- Establish a standing Amherst Rail Transportation Committee to continue to work on restoring and enhancing Amherst passenger rail service.
- Work with Northampton to jointly plan for improved bus access to the Northampton stop.
- Work with Northampton, UMass Transit, and PVRTA to plan for regular, dedicated express bus service tied to the Vermonter schedule.

- Contact legislators and the MassDOT Sec. directly and request more significant involvement by affected communities in the feasibility study and planning for "Inland Route" improvements which could provide passenger access between Amherst and Boston via Palmer,
- Continue to work with NECR, UConn, Palmer and communities and entities in CT others to establish passenger rail service over the NECR line to and from Palmer, via Palmer to Boston, and between UMass and UConn and points south to New London..

DRAFT

April 6, 2010



TOWN OF AMHERST COMMITTEE CHARGE

Committee Name: **SAVE OUR STOP - SOS - TASK FORCE**

Created By- Amherst Select Board

Date Created – May 11, 2009

Appointing Authority – Amherst Select Board

Type of Committee – Time Limited Committee

Term – One (1) year term

Date Task Force Effective – June 1, 2009

Date Task Force Expires – May 30, 2010

Number of Voting Members – 9; one member to be recommended by the Planning Board; one member to be recommended by the Public Transportation Committee; one member to be recommended by the Town/Commercial Relations Committee

Staff Liaisons– Town Manager and Planning Director

Committee Charge Summary – The objectives of the Save Our Stop SOS Task Force are:

- 1) To study the effect that the availability of the Amtrak train stop has on the citizens of Amherst and the region, and
- 2) To study the impact that the discontinuation of the that rail stop would have upon the citizens of Amherst and the region, and
- 3) To recommend to the Select Board actions to enhance passenger rail service in Amherst and protect Amherst from the effect of the discontinuation of the Amtrak stop in Amherst.

The Task Force will work with interested organizations to include the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst Area Chamber of Commerce, Amherst College, and Hampshire College to study the effect of the Amtrak stop on Amherst. The Save Our Stop SOS Task Force shall create and present a final report on the conditions, effort and recommendations on or before May 30, 2010.

May 18, 2009 – Voted unanimously at the Select Board Meeting